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Source: *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Oct., 1917), pp. 157-170

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29738235>

Accessed: 01-08-2014 01:30 UTC

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THE JOURNAL OF RACE DEVELOPMENT

Vol. 8

OCTOBER, 1917

No. 2

THE DEMANDS OF THE BOHEMIAN PEOPLE

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official organ of the Bohemian National Alliance
of America*

It may be taken for granted that war will make great changes in the political map of Europe. The Germans, in spite of their bluster and their reluctance to release their hold on Belgium and Poland, would gladly make peace on the basis of status quo ante, well knowing that their control of Austria-Hungary and Turkey would be a tremendous net gain. But the allies, re-inforced and heartened by America's entry into the war, intend to keep up the fight until they are able to realize in Europe, and indeed throughout the world, the principles for which they stand. As defined by President Wilson, the present war is one of democracy against autocracy. That means, on the one hand, that each citizen of the state, rich or poor, well-born or plebeian, strong or weak, shall have a voice in the government of his country, as against a theory that would confine the right to rule to a hereditary monarch or a privileged class. And it means, also, that every people, whether great or small, powerful or weak, should rule itself, as against the claim of the Teutons that certain races are lordly races destined to rule other, less fortunate peoples. America and its Allies with a sound instinct selected for their war cry "Liberty and Rights of Small Nationalities."

The small nationalities appreciate the fact that this world-wide upheaval constitutes a unique opportunity for the realization of their demands, dreams and ambitions. In every Allied capital and all through the United States voices are heard calling attention to peoples hitherto but

little known to the world at large. I aim to set forth here what the Bohemians, or Czechs, hope to gain from the victory of the side with which America has become identified.

The homeland of the Czechs includes not only the kingdom of Bohemia proper, but all the lands of the ancient Bohemian crown, namely Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. Together they cover an area of 30,795 square miles, less than one per cent of the continental United States. They are, however, thickly populated. According to the census of 1910 slightly over ten million people lived in the three lands named above. That is to say, a territory having less than 1 per cent of the area of this country has more than 10 per cent of the population. But according to the Austrian census only two-thirds of the people use the Czech language in ordinary conversation; the districts bordering on Germany have been settled by Germans and many of the inhabitants, formerly Slavs, have been forcibly Germanized.

Though the Bohemian lands are small and the Czech people live under a foreign government, the land of Bohemia is a beautiful land and the history of its people a glorious story. Bohemia proper is a compact region lying in the heart of Europe, having the shape of a diamond, surrounded by mountains on all four sides. In the space of a few hours' journey the traveler will see fertile valleys, every inch of soil carefully tilled, the small fields looking from the distance like a many colored carpet, the slopes planted to fruit trees; even the roads, and very good roads they are, are lined with cherry and plum trees. You will pass through groves of oaks and beech trees, forests of pines and firs. Every few minutes the train will cross a stream bordered by alders and birches. Villages flit by you, hidden by widespread elms and maples and linden trees. Now and then you will pass through a larger town dominated by tall factory smokestacks, and you will realize that Bohemia is an industrial and manufacturing country just as much as Pennsylvania or Ohio. Everything looks clean, well-ordered and prosperous, or at any rate looked so before the war. You feel that this is an old settled country and

that its people have made the most of it. Both in the border ranges and throughout the Bohemian lands nature has been prodigal with gifts of beauty and riches. One district possesses wonderful limestone caves, another boasts of queer rock formations, other places again are world famous for their mineral springs. But the special ornament of every part of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia are the old castles perched on hills, some in ruins, some well preserved, mute monuments of a wonderful, romantic past. And every city possesses at least one noble church built long before America was discovered.

Nearly fifteen hundred years ago, during the opening days of the Middle Ages, a Slav people calling themselves Czechs settled in this beautiful country, known even then as Bohemia. They were a part of the great Slav race which had occupied the whole eastern half of Europe. With the exception of some tribes that settled along the river Elbe northwest of Bohemia and were early swallowed by the Germans, the Czechs advanced furthest to the West of all the Slavs. That fact constitutes the key to their entire history, for it is a story of a ceaseless struggle to preserve their individuality as a Slav people against the pressure of the Germans who surround them to make Bohemia a German land. The great Hussite movement, the most glorious period of Bohemian history, when all Europe was arrayed against the Czechs in vain, was not merely a protest against the corruption and despotism of the Roman Church, but also a successful rebellion of the nation against German domination and the so-called peaceful penetration.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the kingdom of Bohemia was one of the most progressive countries of Europe. It had the oldest university in Central Europe. There were fewer illiterates among the Czechs than in any other land. Aeneas Sylvius, later Pope Pius II, who traveled in Bohemia in the middle of the fifteenth century, states that every old woman in Bohemia knew the Scriptures better than the average Italian priest. The material condition of the bulk of the people was far better than in Germany or France, not to speak of Italy, Poland or Russia. From

one range of the mountains to the opposite one, the old Slav tongue held undisputed supremacy. The Czechs ruled in their own land. But in the first half of the sixteenth century the Polish dynasty that sat on the throne of Bohemia died out, while Bohemia was threatened by the Turks. With an eye to the Turkish danger the Bohemian estates elected the Hapsburg prince Ferdinand for their king, and when Ferdinand was in the same year 1526 called to the throne of Hungary, foundations were laid for the Austrian empire which has long survived the reason for its existence. As far as Bohemia is concerned, the election of a Hapsburg prince was a fatal blunder to which most of the subsequent misfortunes of the Bohemian people may be traced. The new kings were German, their subjects Slav; the rulers were Catholic, the governed were Protestant. The new dynasty looked upon Bohemia as a country rich in men and money, to be exploited for the greater glory and power of the Hapsburg house. The nation was driven into rebellion in 1618, was defeated in 1620 and treated ever since as a conquered province without any rights which the emperor was bound to respect. German officials administered the government, German colonists were settled on confiscated soil, German language was forced upon the cities. Such was the success of this Germanizing policy that one hundred years ago the Czech language was classed with dead languages, for only the peasants spoke it and hardly any books existed written in this language. But a remarkable national revival originated toward the end of the eighteenth century; the peasants and the Germanized inhabitants of the cities were roused to a consciousness of racial unity by the rediscovery of Bohemian history and by new literary activity in the Czech language. By 1848 there existed once more a Bohemian nation demanding the right to live as such.

Thus arose the great problem of modern Austria, the Bohemian problem. Here was a race 7,000,000 strong, progressive, better educated than the rest of the population of Austria, producing greater men in literature, science, music and fine arts than the nine million Germans in Austria,

a race strengthening every year its hold on the ancestral land which the Germans had already counted for their own, a race asking for liberty to develop its individuality and demanding equal rights with the German minority in its own land. It was difficult to keep such a people in subjection; but from the point of view of the old emperor, during whose long reign the Bohemian problem grew to be more acute every year, from the point of view of the German nobility and bureaucracy who rule in Vienna, a compromise was impossible, for a Slav race is in the eyes of the Germans "minderwertig," of less value than the chosen German race. Long before Americans heard of the German Kultur, the Czechs were told in season and out of season that it was their duty as well as their good fortune to accept the sacred Kultur from the Germans who loved to speak of themselves as the Kulturträger—bringers of culture. Vienna treated the Czech race as Lincoln proposed to treat slavery, when he was running for president in 1860; keep it down with a view to its ultimate extinction. This has been the policy of the Austrian government with regard to the Bohemian question with one or two brief breaks for the last seventy years. The smallest concession to their nationality had to be wrung by the Czechs from a hostile and unwilling government almost by force. It took many years' struggle, before half of the old Prague University was turned over to the Bohemians. For the last thirty years the Czech representatives demanded a second university in some Moravian city, but in vain; this in spite of the fact that for the Austrian Germans, not much more numerous than the Czechs, the state maintains five universities. Every new high school, every Bohemian sign on a courthouse or a railroad station, every political concession to which the Bohemians were entitled by every rule of square deal, was very grudgingly granted by the government, only if the Bohemians were good and their representatives would vote for government measures and the Germans did not object too strenuously. There is a section in the fundamental laws of Austria guaranteeing equal political rights to all the races of Austria, but the Austrian

constitution is respected in Vienna about as much as the Turkish constitution in Constantinople.

Since the beginning of the present century the Bohemian fight for the preservation of their national existence and for equal rights with the Germans has been a losing fight. The men who were at the helm in Vienna, the bureaucrats and the aristocrats, the high army officers and the archdukes surrounding Emperor Francis Joseph, determined to make no further concessions to the Czechs. Foreign politics of Austria-Hungary came completely under the sway of Germany, and that had its influence on the internal policies. Bohemian deputies opposed and sharply criticized the aggressive designs of Austria against the Balkan Slavs, and for this "disloyal" attitude incurred the ill-will of the old emperor who was possessed with the ambition of increasing the domains of the Hapsburgs before he died. The Germans of Austria took steadily a more high-handed course of action, being sure of the support of Germany. Since 1908 German deputies to the Diet of Bohemia adopted a policy of obstruction and would not permit any business whatever to be transacted by the diet. The deadlock continued until July, 1913, when the government dissolved the diet without calling a new election, as the constitution required, and set aside what was left of Bohemian self-government by creating an imperial commission to administer the local affairs of Bohemia.

These things stood between the Bohemian nation and its German rulers, when the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia was delivered on July 26, 1914, the spark that set the whole world aflame. Czechs were put in uniform and given rifles with orders to shoot men upon whom they had always looked as friends, in order that the race which had always been the enemy of Bohemia might become the ruling race of Europe. It would be ludicrous, if it were not so tragical, that Bohemians should lay down their lives for the benefit of the Germans who had been their national enemies ever since the beginning of history. The Czech reservists knew well that the war was one of German aggression, and they also appreciated the fact that should the German-Austrian

side win, the long struggle for the preservation of Czech nationality would be over, hopelessly lost. They acted in accordance with their convictions. When the first reservists were entraining, their women parted from them with the words: "Don't shoot the Serbians." Bohemian regiments rebelled, deserted, surrendered. Disaffection of Czech soldiers is by this time an old story. It was officially confirmed in the Austrian Parliament by Minister of Public Defense, Von Giorgi, who stated that three regiments went over to the Russians in a body during the Carpathian campaign early in 1915. Measures were then taken by the Austrian general staff to put a stop to this, and Czechs were scattered through German and Magyar regiments. But even as late as June, 1917, during the short-lived Russian offensive in Galicia the 81st Regiment, composed largely of Bohemian soldiers, notified Russians during the preliminary bombardment at Koniuchy not to waste ammunition on their sector and surrendered without resistance, as soon as Russian soldiers reached their trenches. In Bohemia and Moravia, too, for as they were from the scene of operations, people manifested their abhorrence of the war and their sympathy with the Allies so plainly that no one could be in doubt as to where the Bohemians stand in this war.

Like other small nations, the Czechs look forward to the coming peace congress with hope that it will fulfill their ardent national ambitions. Now the ambitions of the Czechs may be summed up briefly as the erection of an independent Czechoslovak state. Two elements are contained in this program that seem to go beyond the Bohemian political program before the war: namely independence and union with the Slovaks.

Before the war independence, the restoration of the ancient Bohemian kingdom as it existed prior to the election of the Hapsburgs, seemed a vain dream; however beautiful and attractive it may have been to the majority of the Czech people, it did not appear to be within the range of possibilities. Since the granting of the so-called constitutional regime by Francis Joseph in the sixties the

political fights of the Czech people were directed at the achievement of freedom within Austria. "Historical state right" was the watchword of the Bohemian representatives in the Vienna Reichsrat and the Bohemian and Moravian Diets. That meant the recognition of the separate position of the lands of the Bohemian crown within the Hapsburg Empire and full self-government, such as had been granted to Hungary in 1867. When war broke out, all political life in Bohemia was stilled at first. Civil rights were suspended and civil courts closed, newspapers were subjected to the most rigorous censorship, and since parliament was not called together, the elected representatives of the Czech people were prevented from expressing their sentiments. In fact the most prominent deputies were promptly clapped into jail on a charge of high treason. Until June of this year Bohemia could not speak, and the first important statement voicing the demands of the Bohemian people came from the Czech emigrants in Allied and neutral countries.

Under the leadership of Thomas Garigue Masaryk, professor in the University of Prague and deputy in the Vienna Reichsrat, an organization was formed of all the foreign Czech colonies, and a manifesto was published in November, 1915, in Paris, London, Petrograd, Geneva and the United States upon which the Bohemians look as their Declaration of Independence. Like the American Declaration of Independence the manifesto recites the wrongs suffered by Bohemia at the hands of its rulers and contains a scathing arraignment of the decrepit empire of the Hapsburgs.

It is a standing threat to the peace of Europe, a mere tool of Germany seeking conquest in the East, a state having no destiny of its own, unable to construct an organic state composed of a number of equal, free, progressive races. The dynasty, living in its traditions of absolutism, manages to maintain the semblance of the former world power through the undemocratic coöperation of a sterile nobility, a bureaucracy that belongs to no race and a body of army officers that is against every race.

Of the demands of the Czechs the manifesto says this:

All Bohemian parties have up to this time been fighting for a qualified independence within the limits of Austria-Hungary. But the events of this terrible war and the reckless violence of Vienna constrain us to claim independence without regard to Austria-Hungary. We ask for an independent Czecho-Slovak state.

The work of the exiles, carried on in Paris, London, Rome and Petrograd, received notable recognition, when the Allies made the liberation of Bohemia one of the conditions of peace. In their reply to President Wilson the Allies stated on January 10, 1917: "The civilized world knows that they (the aims of the Allies) include the liberation of Italians, Slavs, Roumanians and Czechoslovaks from foreign domination." And it was this threat of dismemberment of Austria, coupled with the effects of the Russian revolution, which compelled the statesmen of Vienna to relax the police rule heretofore practiced and try to convince the world, if they could, that the peoples of Austria were satisfied to remain under the rule of the Hapsburgs. The Reichsrat was called to meet on May 30, 1917.

It was the hope of Emperor Charles and his advisers that by promises of concessions and the lifting of the most oppressive coercive measures the Czechs could be induced to repudiate the promise of the Allies to liberate them. For the first time since the war began the Bohemian people could give a more or less guarded expression to their sentiments, and they endorsed to the full the demands of the Bohemian emigrants in foreign lands. The emperor came too late with his offers of compromise; between the ruler and his Czech subjects were the graves of hundreds of thousands who had been slain to satisfy the ambition of the dynasty and the megalomania of the German race; the Slavs could not forgive the thousands of gallows erected by order of the emperor, nor could they pass over so lightly the sufferings of the past three years. The Bohemian people and the Bohemian deputies took up an attitude of uncompromising hostility to Austria.

The first notable expression of the feelings of Bohemia came from the mouths of the literary men of the nation

who to the number of 185 signed an appeal to the deputies previous to the meeting of the parliament calling on them to be firm.

The people demand of you that you be equal to these great historical times, that you sacrifice all other considerations, that you offer your utmost abilities, that you act at this time as men who are independent, who have no personal ties and obligations, men of supreme moral and national consciousness. If you cannot comply with everything the nation demands of you and lays upon you, then give up your mandates, before you enter the parliament, and appeal to your final authority, to your nation.

The deputies measured up to the expectations of their people. All political differences dividing them were for the time being obliterated. In the days before the war the Bohemian delegation to the Reichsrat was divided into some seven parties. Now they came together and formed the United Czech Deputies Club, and a declaration was made by Deputy Staněk on behalf of all the deputies upon the opening day of the parliament which scorned all ideas of compromise.

Relying in this historical moment upon the natural right of each nation to self-determination and free development, fortified further by irrevocable historical rights and state papers of undoubted validity, we shall demand at the head of our people the union of all branches of the Czecho-Slovak people into one democratic Bohemian State which shall include the Slovak branch connected geographically with the historical Bohemian fatherland.

The cabinet of Clam-Martinic made a number of unsuccessful attempts to come to an understanding with the defiant deputies. They were offered several places in the ministry, but former minister Prášek answered on June 26 in these words:

The Czech nation will take good care to keep away from the cabinet. It has definitely given up all thought of sending one or two of its deputies to play the rôle of fools in a German centralist ministry. The Bohemian nation is grown up and it holds together all its forces in order to conquer independence.

Seydler who succeeded Martinic tried another remedy to save the moribund empire. He carried through the parliament a bill to create a commission for constitutional

reform, but the Czechs refused categorically to have any part in its deliberations. The most radical declaration that has been so far made by the authorized spokesmen of the Czech nation is the statement given out by the Czech Club on July 24:

It is our right and our duty to demand not a change in the constitution of the kingdoms and provinces represented in the Austrian parliament, but an independent Czechoslovak state, possessing all the attributes of sovereignty and including all the Czechoslovak people in their historical homelands. Neither the Vienna parliament, nor this commission, is competent to settle this question.

All the public declarations and speeches of deputies put special emphasis on the union of Slovaks with Czechs, while the Allies speak of the liberation of Czecho-Slovaks. The Slovaks are even less known than the Bohemians. To set out their case in some detail would require another paper as lengthy as this one; but without some mention of the Slovaks the presentation of the demands of the Bohemian people would not be complete.

Whether the Czechs and the Slovaks form two distinct peoples or are merely two branches of the same people is a matter of purely theoretical interest. The undoubted fact is that they are Slavs speaking languages that differ far less than low German from high German, or the Scotch dialect from the South of England speech. One thousand years ago, before the advent of the Magyars, there was a great Slovak kingdom whose center was in Moravia and which extended through Hungary toward the seats of the Jugoslavs. But when Magyars conquered Hungary at the close of the ninth century, Slavs living south of the Carpathians became subject to the Magyars, while Moravia became a part of the Bohemian kingdom. This political separation has continued ever since, but in the intellectual realm the two peoples remained in closest contact. Slovaks learned from the Czechs in the centuries following the Hussite wars, while some of the greatest names connected with the resurrection of the Bohemian nation a hundred years ago, Palacký, Šafařík, Kolár, were Slovaks. The

greatest blow to the union of the two races, greatly desired by the leaders on both sides, was the Ausgleich of 1867, by which the Austrian monarchy was divided into two parts, the first being known officially as the kingdoms and lands represented in the Reichsrat, the other as the Kingdom of Hungary. The compromise of 1867 was forced from Francis Joseph by Magyar noblemen, and a Magyar oligarchy has remained ever since in absolute control of the affairs of Hungary. The fate of the Slovaks under their Magyar masters has been far worse than the sufferings of the Czechs under German rule. Magyars are a Tartar race akin to the Turks; when they conquered freedom for Hungary they proceeded with Turkish thoroughness to make the words Hungarian and Magyar synonymous. Everything non-Magyar became treason against the Hungarian state. Public schools in Slovakia became Magyar, the private schools were closed and their endowments confiscated; Slovak newspapers were subjected to burdensome censorship and by manipulation of elections for which Hungary became famous Magyars were elected to represent Slovak constituencies in the Budapest parliament. Of course, the only result of this policy of barbarous violence was to drive the Slovaks into closer relations to the Czechs and make the ties that connected the two peoples much stronger.

At home the Slovaks are still in the situation in which the Czechs were before the convocation of the Vienna parliament; their representatives cannot speak. But in the foreign colonies, principally in Russia and America, Slovak organizations have joined hands with the Bohemian emigrants and work together for the erection of one Czechoslovak state. The army which has existed in Russia for over a year, as well as the army which is now being formed in France, are known as the Czechoslovak armies, and the Czechoslovak National Council of Paris, the supreme authority of this movement, has a Czech president and a Slovak vice-president. The Bohemian demands include the incorporation of the Slovak districts of Hungary into

the future independent Czechoslovak state, because such is the desire of the Slovaks themselves.

The restored Bohemia which will become one of the family of nations, when the Germans are definitely defeated, will be a state of some importance in the affairs of Europe. With an area of some fifty thousand square miles and a population of twelve million people it will be larger than Belgium or Holland and will have more people than Sweden and Norway combined. It will be strong economically and financially, for the Bohemian lands are now the richest provinces of Austria; from their taxes were defrayed the deficits of the Alpine provinces and the monarchy's pretensions to be regarded as a Great Power with a formidable army and a respectable navy were supported by money drawn principally from Bohemia and Moravia. Freed from this incubus Bohemia with its natural riches and the high cultural standing of its people ought to be one of the most prosperous countries of Europe.

It will have its troubles, of course. Not the least of them is the problem of the German minority. According to the Austrian statistics which are notoriously biased in favor of the Germans, one-third of the population of the Bohemian lands is German. In the Slovak districts of Hungary which are to form a part of the new state there will be here and there small Magyar and German minorities. It is unnecessary to state that the separation of Bohemia from Austria will be far from welcome to the Germans, for it will put an end to their domination over the Czechs. If it were feasible to separate the German districts from the Czech, the problem would be solved. But few German districts of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia are purely German; everywhere the two races are living side by side, and the annexation of districts with German majority to Germany or Austria would mean the forcible Germanization of Czech minorities. Besides, Bohemia is a geographical unit and no other frontiers can be devised for it than its natural mountain frontiers. It is also well to bear in mind that in an independent Bohemia the percentage of the German

race will dwindle down surprisingly from the old figures. Most of the Jews heretofore declared their language to be German; in a Bohemian state they will claim the Bohemian language for their own, since they are well versed in both. State employees and workingmen in German factories who in many cases were under the old régime put down as using the German language in their ordinary intercourse—as the Austrian census calls it “Umgangssprache”—will be entered correctly as Czechs. And no doubt a considerable proportion of the population of the Bohemian lands that formerly was Slav and was gradually Germanized will revert to the language of their fathers. It is a conservative estimate that the first census under the independent government will establish the percentage of Germans in the lands of the ancient Bohemian crown as less than one-fourth; and when Slovakia is included, the German minority will be considerably less than one-fifth of the total population.

The Czechs are willing to give their German neighbors all the guarantees they may desire that no policy of oppression will be applied to them, such as has characterized their own rule in Bohemia. Dr. Adolf Stránský, speaking on behalf of all the Czech deputies in the Vienna Parliament on June 12, 1917, had this to say on the point in question:

We should be faithless to the moral foundation of our program if we thought of its realization upon any other basis than the complete, unambiguous and secured guarantees that full racial freedom and autonomy of Germans in our country shall be safe and their national honor unimpaired.

The demands of the Bohemians are well founded in justice and right and fortunately they happen to coincide with the interests of America and its Allies. The creation of an independent and united Poland, a free Bohemia and a strong Yugoslavia will erect a barrier from the Baltic to the Adriatic against which German aggression toward the East will beat in vain. If incidentally this program necessitates the disappearance of Austria, no one will regret it, except the Hapsburgs themselves.